

The background of the entire cover is a romantic scene of a young man and woman in Regency-era clothing. The man is wearing a dark coat over a waistcoat and cravat, and the woman is in a light-colored, patterned dress with a red sash and long white gloves. They are standing in a snowy garden with a large house in the background. The scene is decorated with various Christmas ornaments: a large teal ornament with a snowflake design, a red ornament with a snowflake, and a black ornament. There are also pine branches with snow at the top. A large red bow with gold trim and sparkles is positioned on the right side, partially overlapping the couple and the text.

SUSAN M.
BAGANZ

*Gabriel's
Gift*

A REGENCY CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE

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Free Book Offer

Gabriel's Gift
Susan M. Baganz

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Gabriel's Gift

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Dedication

To my own December miracle and Christmas blessing, Joy Lucille. You
are a delight to my heart.

BOOKS BY SUSAN M. BAGANZ

Black Diamond Regency Romantic Suspense

The Baron's Blunder (Prequel) novella

The Virtuous Viscount (Book 1)

Lord Phillip's Folly (Book 2)

Sir Michael's Mayhem (coming soon)

Lord Harrow's Heart (coming soon)

The Captain's Conquest (coming soon)

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances

Pesto & Potholes

Salsa & Speed Bumps

Feta & Freeways

Root Beer & Roadblocks

Bratwurst & Bridges...

and others coming soon!

Historical Christmas Novella

Fragile Blessings

Gabriel's Gift

Short Story Compilation

Little Bits O' Love

Late November, 1812

Colby, Northamptonshire, England

Gabriel sighed as he walked out the front door of his new home and gazed at the village and the humble church building over which he now held spiritual responsibility. He longed to give hope to the brokenhearted and to spur his congregants on to good deeds, but he hadn't stepped foot inside the place. A young woman dressed in lavender walked into the church. Half-mourning? Her blonde hair was barely visible beneath her bonnet.

He grabbed his coat and hat, shut the door behind him, and hurried to the structure. The air was crisp and clear on this November morning, and as the sun shone bright, it added a lightness to his steps.

Entering the church, he stopped inside the door to take in the view. The young woman arranged flowers at the altar, her movements efficient and graceful. The stained-glass windows bathed her in a soft kaleidoscope of light and colour. He stopped to savor the view and then slowly stepped forward to discover if he might capture a glimpse of her face.

A soft cry caused the young woman to turn, and he caught her profile. Her lips opened as she gasped. "Oh, my!"

Mattie? His breathing raced at realizing his heart's desire stood before him. How long had he searched for her? Gabriel rushed forward. She turned her head his direction, and her beauty dazzled him. Her eyes widened in recognition before she turned away. She moved toward the pew behind her and bent down.

Rounding the edge of the bench, he followed her gaze to a small bassinette from which the crying had come.

Matilda crouched down and cooed to the child. "Who are you, little one? And who left you here?"

Gabriel came close to discover a tiny child. His guess was that it was very new. "How unusual," he whispered.

When she turned to look up at him, he thrust a hand forward. "Good day, Miss Wilcox, I'm the new pastor here."

She nodded. "Gabriel. I didn't realize that grandfather... He never gave me your name." A delightful rose-color tinted her cheeks. "I came to add flowers for the service tomorrow. I have no idea whose child this is. I am acquainted with most of the people in the village, and no one was due to give birth. What do we do?"

Gabriel knelt by the bassinette and scooped the crying infant into his arms. "There, there, little one." The babe quieted as he patted the child's back.

"You're good with children."

"You remember my large family. Some of my siblings have already presented us with the next generation, so I possess experience as an uncle."

She nodded and frowned. "I know nothing of caring for babies."

"As long as they are warm, fed and loved, they tend to do well from what I've been able to determine."

"Where do we take him? Or is it a her?"

Gabriel's eyebrows rose as he moved the child into the crook of his arm. "Guess we can take a peek and find out."

Miss Wilcox turned her head away.

He unwrapped the child and lifted the gown it wore to peek into the nappy. "'Tis a boy." He dropped the gown back down and swaddled the infant. "He's probably only a few days old."

"How can you tell?"

"The sound of his cry and his navel."

"Shall we call for the doctor?" she asked

"What can he do?"

"Perhaps he will know to whom the child belongs." Matilda rose to her feet.

"Is there a midwife about?"

"Yes. Down the next street. Mrs. Glowery, I believe."

"I suggest we take him there." Gabriel stood with the baby held tight against him.

Miss Wilcox nodded.



"Did you want to carry the child while I take the bassinette?" He offered.

The timbre of his voice caused gooseflesh to stipple Matilda's arms. Gabriel Morgan, a childhood friend, had grown into a handsome man. She rubbed her arms. "I can take the bassinette. It is only a short walk." She'd never handled a baby and was afraid she'd embarrass herself. She bent to pick up the bassinette and led the way out of the church, with Gabriel following. She'd known the village was getting a new preacher, but Gabriel—when had he grown so attractive and virile? She frowned. This was not something a spinster should notice. Past the marriageable age, she had no right to entertain attraction to any man, old friend or not—especially one who served God.

She started down the street with him by her side. He once again held the child against his shoulder, rubbing the baby's back and talking softly. When they arrived at Mrs. Glowery's home their knock on the door brought only the maid.

"Is Mrs. Glowery in?"

"No, Miss Wilcox. She left a few days ago to visit her daughter for her lying in. I don't expect her back for another week or more." The

maid looked past Tilly to Gabriel with the infant.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Matilda said. “Molly, this is Mr. Morgan, the new pastor of our parish. We found this infant in the church this morning, but I recall no one hereabouts who was due to have a baby.”

“Oh, the poor child. I’m aware of no one who was expecting either.”

“What should we do?”

“There is no place for the child. Miss Wilcox, you should take him home with you.”

“I don’t know anything about caring for a baby.”

“Your mother might help you. It would be the best thing to do. Ask your grandfather.”

Matilda’s shoulders drooped. “Thank you, Molly.”

“It was nice meeting you, Mr. Morgan.”

“I hope to see you in church tomorrow, Molly.”

The maid’s face lit up. “I’m looking forwards to hearing you preach.”

Gabriel nodded as the door closed.

Tilly turned toward him. “What are we to do? It’s a bit of a walk to my grandfather’s estate.”

“This infant weighs nothing. I can handle him if you can carry the basket.”

Tilly nodded. “I can manage. Thank you.”

They walked in silence as she led them on the road out of town to her grandfather’s house. She respected the fact that Gabriel didn’t badger her with questions. She covertly sneaked glances at him as the sun glinted off his brown hair to reveal lighter golden shades. He wasn’t too much taller than she, and his relaxed gait led her to consider him as a man of action, not study. Finally, she had the courage to break the silence.

“Why did you go into the church?”

He grinned as he turned to her. “Youngest son. It was either that, the military, or the law.”

“Pardon me for saying, but you seem to have too much energy to be cooped up in a study pouring over the scriptures.”

He sighed. “I enjoy my study of God’s Word and sharing it with people. Being a clergyman is far more than that though. It is faith in action. Serving others. That was something I believed would feed my own soul as well as honor God, more than my energies would on the battlefield or a courtroom. And I enjoy people.”

“Oh,” was all she could say.

“Do you know of a wet nurse who might help with the baby?”

“One of the cottagers birthed a baby two months ago.”

“Perhaps she’d be willing to help. Do you want me to go with you

to find out?"

"We need to talk to my grandfather first."

"While the child is sleeping at present, he will awake soon wanting to be fed."

"We're almost home."

He nodded and slipped into silence. She obviously was not making a good impression on her old friend, but that was most assuredly a good thing.



Gabriel delighted in the soft scent of lily of the valley coming from the beautiful young woman at his side. He remembered praying as he'd packed his bags to move to this area of England, that God would provide him with a suitable help-mate. Was this woman the one? She held herself with as much dignity as any lady would. Affection swelled within as he remembered how well they had gotten along when they were children.

As they approached the house, he was struck by the grandeur of the place and the beauty of the landscaping. Approaching the front steps, he followed her. The door swung open and a stately butler stood aside to allow them entrance.

"Good morrow, Miss Wilcox. Did you have a good walk?" the man asked kindly.

"Yes, Simon, I did. This is our new pastor, Mr. Morgan. Has my grandfather or mother appeared yet this morning?"

"Your grandfather is in his study. Your mother has not left her rooms."

Matilda sighed. "Would you inform my grandfather that I seek audience with him?"

"Yes, miss." The door shut behind them and Simon strode down the hall. Matilda placed the bassinette on the floor and removed her gloves and cloak, hanging the latter on a rack.

Gabriel took in the splendor of the house. While not ornate, it was spotless with marble floors and a solid oak staircase. The chandelier above sparkled as light struck it from a window above the door. Unusual. Spectacular. It reminded him of his childhood home.

Simon returned and nodded to Matilda and led them to the study. "Miss Wilcox and Mr. Morgan to see you, my lord," the man intoned. They entered the room and the door closed behind them.

An elderly man rose and came from behind his desk and strode over to Matilda. "Tilly, you have finished decorating the church?"

"Yes, Grandfather." She turned to Gabriel. "This is Mr. Morgan, our new pastor. We found this infant at the front of the church. Mrs. Glowery is out of town. We don't know to whom this little one belongs."

“Mr. Morgan. It is a pleasure to meet you. And this is the infant abandoned at the church?”

“The pleasure is mine, Lord—”

“Oh, I am so sorry!” Miss Wilcox exclaimed. “This is Lord Hennison.”

“My benefactor. It is a pleasure to meet you, my lord.” Gabriel said and extended a hand in greeting. A firm handshake came from the older gentleman.

“Yes. Yes. It was good to meet you. I knew your grandfather. I was sorry to hear of his passing. Is your father well?”

“He is in good health. Thank you for asking. He was pleased that I would be serving in your parish. Grandfather spoke well of this place before he passed.”

“He was a good man and I am pleased to be acquainted with his offspring. Well, now, it seems we have an orphan who needs a home. Tilly, would you go fetch Mrs. Adams? We’ll need to see if Mrs. Clark would be willing to care for this infant along with her daughter for the nonce.”

“As you wish, Grandfather.” Matilda departed the room.

“You have a way with children, do you, Mr. Morgan?”

“If it would please you to call me Gabriel, my lord.”

“Gabriel. You were named after your grandfather, then?”

“Aye, ’tis true.”

“Please sit. Hopefully, we can find this babe a safe place where it will be nurtured while we try to decide what to do from thereon.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Scripture exhorts us to take care of widows and orphans. I am inclined to do what I can to provide for the child.”

“He should have a name.”

“Wise thinking. A child with no identity will struggle. Any suggestions?” Lord Hennison asked.

“Joshua? Joseph? Henry? Edward?”

“Let me take a look at the lad,” Lord Hennison said.

Gabriel tried to move so the baron could see the face of the child.

“He at least looks healthy. How about Bennett?”

“A diminutive of Benedict. It means blessing. A colloquial, but meaningful, name that gives him a future and a promise. I approve,” Gabriel said.

“Good, now Bennett will be provided for while we try to locate his parents. In the meantime, I suspect Mrs. Clark won’t mind caring for another child if she is compensated for it.”

“You are generous, my lord.”

“Let me call for a carriage to convey you to the cottage. Tilly can accompany you there.” The man rose to go to the door and left to

speak to the butler.

Tilly? Gabriel nodded and hid a smile. He had shortened Matilda's name to Mattie when they were younger. Then she was light-hearted and laughed often. He longed to be awarded with one of her smiles now. What it would take to be so blessed? He also wondered how she came to live with her mother and grandfather. What had happened to Mr. Wilcox? Curiosity was his most besetting sin. Obviously, Matilda lived in comfort under the care of her grandfather. That was sufficient enough information for the nonce.

She returned. "Oh, where is Grandfather?"

"Bespeaking a carriage."

She nodded and sat in a chair adjacent to his. Her back was straight and her gaze on the infant.

"Do you want to hold him?" Gabriel asked. "Your grandfather gave him the name Bennett."

"Tis a nice name for one so little. He is comfortable in your arms and can remain there."

Lord Hennison came back to the room. "The carriage will be ready shortly. A messenger has been sent, and Mrs. Adams is preparing a basket for you to take. Tilly, I want you to accompany Gabriel to deliver the child to Mrs. Clark's care."

"Yes, Grandfather." She rose and Gabriel did as well.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, my lord. May I anticipate your attendance in service on the morrow?"

The older man grinned. "Wouldn't miss it. We've been without a pastor for a few months now."

"Who has been preaching the Word?"

"Grandfather has taken it upon himself to do so until your arrival." Matilda volunteered.

"I hope I can do as much justice to the Word as you have."

"Never fear, young man. I anticipate the congregation will enjoy your youthful countenance to my dry, dusty sermons."

Matilda remained silent. Interesting that she did not gainsay her grandfather.

"The Apostle Paul said he was not a great speaker, yet look at the power of the words he shared. It is the power of the gospel, not the presentation, which is key. I pray I can do it justice."

"Well said, Mr. Morgan. Off with you now before that child starts crying for his supper."

Gabriel followed Matilda out of the room. She donned her cloak and gloves and led the way down the steps to the awaiting carriage. A footman retrieved the bassinette and placed it inside, and then Matilda followed. Gabriel climbed in last and sat rear-facing so he would lose no opportunity to gaze upon his friend who had grown

into a stunning young woman. Why had she never married?



Once the baby was settled in his temporary home, Gabriel insisted that the carriage return to the manor house so Miss Wilcox would arrive safely. He walked back to the village with a bounce in his step. Little Bennett possessed a benefactor and would not be abandoned to die. Gabriel praised God for His provision and began to ponder the text from which he was to preach on the morrow. He prayed as well that Matilda would be joining her grandfather, and wondered more about what had happened to his childhood friend. Given her stiffness around him now, he suspected she would be a challenge should he choose to court her.

Gabriel loved challenges.

First Sunday of Advent

Why did church benches have to be so hard and uncomfortable? Tilly fought not to fidget in their front row, family pew. She drank in the sight of the vibrant man who now led the congregation. Hard to believe her childhood friend could captivate her so completely when she thought she was long past that age of the mooncalf adoration she once held for him.

When everyone had been seated, and the man began to preach, her heart quickened. He walked to the side of the lectern as he poured out the truths of Scripture. Gabriel's passion for God and His Word both hypnotized and humbled her. When he finished expounding on the text and they rose to sing the final hymn, she struggled to breathe once again.

Once dismissed, she slowly made her way out of the church to where Gabriel met and greeted the congregants. It seemed that all the young women, and the older ones as well, were enamored of the new preacher. She could not blame them, yet jealousy welled within her breast at the sight.

She chided herself. *Just because I saw him first doesn't mean he is mine.* Ah, but her foolish heart wouldn't listen to reason.

"Mr. Morgan, I've never heard the like. You bring fresh air and life into God's Word when you preach." Her grandfather was hearty in his greeting. "I am inspired by your words this morning."

Gabriel nodded. "Thank you for your compliments, my lord. The glory alone should go to God. I am only His vessel to do as He leads."

Grandfather nodded and grinned. "True. Very true. Would you like to join us for luncheon when you are finished greeting everyone?"

"I appreciate the offer, my lord. Perhaps another time? I already have plans for this afternoon."

"I am sure you will be busy getting acquainted with everyone. When it is convenient for you, I would love to talk with you more about your message. A visit whenever you are able would not go amiss."

"You are too gracious. Thank you." Gabriel glanced at Tilly, and the smile he gave her brought heat to her cheeks. "Perhaps we may go check on young Bennett this week? Would you like to join me for that, Miss Wilcox?"

Tilly was puzzled. "He is in good hands with Mrs. Clark. Why would you visit a baby?"

"Why did the shepherds visit an infant child?"

"Jesus? Because He was the Messiah, the Promised One. And an angel appeared to them."

“True, but consider this, dear Miss Wilcox; isn’t every child special? And were you not a type of angel to the babe when you rescued him from certain death? God has a plan for each of us, does he not?”

Confusion swirled within her. “I’d never thought of it that way.”

“Just because the mother abandoned her child, does not mean God ever abandons us.”

She nodded and turned away mutely to follow her grandfather. *God never abandons us?* Her own father had when he killed himself. She sniffed and stepped up into the carriage to sit next to her grandfather. She would set such thoughts aside for now.

“What a wonderful service, do you not think so, Tilly? Mr. Morgan is God’s answer to my prayers for someone to revive our parish. I feel ten years younger just having listened to his sermon this morning. I know God hasn’t completed His plan for me here on earth, but today I was reminded that we all are called to that same glorious path. Refreshing, ey?”

“Aye, Grandfather. Refreshing would be one word for it.” She stared down at the prayer book in her hands.

“I wish your mother would come. She’s spent too much time moping in her rooms. Her melancholy would be greatly reduced if she would only partake of life instead of hiding from it.”

“I’m sure you are correct, Grandfather. I shall check on her when we return home.”

“You’re a delightful woman, Tilly. Perhaps you shall catch the eye of our young Mr. Morgan.”

“I’m not worthy to marry a clergyman, Grandfather.”

“And why not? You both come from noble families. He is an attractive man and obviously loves children. To hold a great-grandchild before I leave this world would please me greatly.”

Heat rose in her cheeks. “I’m not yet out of mourning.”

Her grandfather’s larger hand came to grasp hers. “Love doesn’t obey a timeline set by human standards, and I wish you would find someone to love, Tilly. I won’t be around forever, and while I’ve settled a handsome sum on you should I leave this earth before your marriage, I long to see you happily settled. It would ease this old man’s heart since I leave no heir to my title and lands.”

“You have given me more than I could ever ask for, Grandfather.”

“Have I? I’ve done only what any loving parent or grandparent would do in taking your mother and you into my home.”

“Perhaps that is true, but it is more than I deserve.”

“Why should you say such a thing?”

The carriage pulled up to the house and the door opened. Tilly avoided answering the question as she stepped down. She awaited her

grandfather, and together they walked into the house. Tilly took the stairs to her room to shed her Sunday clothes and put on a simpler gown. When she finished, she went to find her mother.

The woman was still abed. It seemed as though she lived her life there since her husband's passing. Tilly entered and opened the draperies. "I've returned from church, Mother."

Her mother yawned and stretched. "And was our new preacher a dead bore like your Grandfather?"

"Grandfather was not boring. His delivery might have been dry but he sincerely believed all he taught us and for that I am grateful."

"You are too generous."

"No, Mother. It is Grandfather who is generous. Without him you would have needed to seek employment, as would I."

"Now you speak foolishness."

"Do I? I know that losing Father was hard. I have grieved as well." Tears sought escape as they had all morning, even during Gabriel's impassioned message. She was so obviously unworthy of her father's love, much less God's.

"I loved your father, Tilly."

"Of a certain." She squeezed her mother's hand. "Will you join us downstairs for our Sunday repast?"

"Thank you, but no. Now tell me about this new preacher."

Tilly sighed. "Remember the Morgans, our neighbors? Gabriel has grown into an attractive man, and all the young women in the parish are making eyes at him. He is intelligent, and has spoken of God like none I've ever heard before."

"You are enamored of him, too? I remember the two of you getting into mischief when you were younger."

"That was before boarding school. I will admit he is handsome, but his confidence and energy intimidates me as well." How else could she explain the fluttering of her heart when she was near him? Certainly, he'd never incited that reaction when she was younger.

"I had always longed for a titled man for you," Mother sighed and dramatically rested the back of her hand against her forehead.

"Hiding away in the country isn't the ideal place to find one of those. And given Father's..." she couldn't finish the sentence. Her Mother's tears smote her heart for even bringing up the death of the man she'd married. "I'm sorry, Mother."

Choking back sobs, her mother responded. "You may leave me now."

Chastened, Tilly rose and left the room. It seemed that almost every conversation with her mother ended the same way. It was as if the woman were stuck in a well of grief from which no one could help her escape. Perhaps it was a place she didn't want to leave.



Gabriel returned to the vicarage alone. He'd received a plethora of invitations to dine, and had tried, as gracefully as possible, to decline them all. His own cook was flustered by the variety of food already being delivered to his door since his arrival yesterday. Apparently, various misses in the neighborhood had spied his moving in and adventure with Miss Wilcox.

Mattie.

He longed to understand the stricken sorrow in her eyes. Why would such a beautiful woman hide away in the country when she should be dancing at London society balls? He was certain there was a story there, and his shepherd's heart longed to ease her pain.

Careful where you tread, young man. He could almost hear his father's words of caution. Gabriel might not be titled or hold claim to worldly wealth, but his father had warned him that even as a pastor, he would need to be wise. He possessed a comfortable, reliable inheritance and did not need a benefactor. Preaching was what God had called him to do, not simply the easiest of three choices he had available. He knew he could have never been content as a country squire. While there was value to serving one's tenants, his heart was equally concerned for their spiritual health.

He'd never told anyone that he'd been inspired by hearing an eclectic mix of Puritan, Methodist, and Evangelical preachers. Whilst his family remained unaware, he would sneak off to listen to all they had to teach him about God. His eyes were opened to a methodology that surpassed the rigid liturgy of the church. He'd prayed the Holy Spirit would light a fire in his new congregation, and that not one would be attracted to the young man giving the message but rather to the glorious Lord he proclaimed.

He ate a simple meal and strode out to the garden behind the house to sit and pray.

His thoughts kept straying to the lovely Matilda. Holding little Bennett yesterday had kindled in him a desire for a wife and family of his own. He closed his eyes, and even as he recalled her face, his heart ached for the pain she hid from those around her. He must remember that her spiritual need trumped his desire for a wife. He'd minister to her soul before he considered a courtship, if that's where God led him.

Lord, help me be content with my single state and stay focused on the task to which You've called me. Open my eyes to see beneath the surface. I cannot do this without You.



Monday came and Gabriel made his first visit to see Mrs. Clark and check on the baby.

“Mr. Morgan, please, come in.” Mr. Clark motioned Gabriel into the house.

“Thank you. I wanted to see how your wife was doing caring for two infants.”

“She’s not getting much sleep.” The man yawned. “I must admit the lad is a charmer though when he’s not crying.”

Gabriel grinned. He was led into the main living space where Mrs. Clark was just putting her daughter into a small bassinet similar to the one in which Bennett rested.

Mrs. Clark looked up at Gabriel. “Mr. Morgan. Can I get you some tea?”

“Thank you. No. I came to check on the little lad.”

“Did you want to hold him? He’s a bit of a snuggler but I’ve not much time to give him for that.”

“I’d love to.”

Gabriel sat, and Mrs. Clark brought the babe. He held the child in his arms and big dark eyes peered up at him. “Hello, Bennett. We’ve yet to be introduced. I’m Mr. Morgan.”

“Your first name is Gabriel, am I correct?” Mrs. Clark asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then you must be this young man’s guardian angel.”

“The angel was the young woman who first found him. Miss Wilcox.”

“She is an angel. She visits people and brings them things they need.”

“Really? Such as?”

“When we were about to have our daughter, she brought cloths for nappies and burping the baby, and she’d knitted a sweet little blanket to keep her warm. Miss Wilcox always seems to understand just what anyone needs and provides it. She may not say much, but her heart is big.”

Gabriel nodded. So, the woman his heart desired liked to minister to the physical needs of those in the parish? Good to know.

“Too bad about her father.”

Frowning and reluctant to gossip, Gabriel couldn’t help but ask. “What about him?”

Mrs. Clark leaned forward and whispered, “He hurt his back after a fall from a horse and took to the drink. Ended up killing himself.” She turned to her husband who sat nearby. “How long ago was that now?”

Her husband shrugged. “They moved here just when you learnt you were with child.”

She nodded. “That’s right. And we’ve never seen Mrs. Wilcox. I hear tell she stays in her bedroom. And Miss Wilcox, she has the heart of an angel, but I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her smile.”

“Grief shrouds that house,” her husband added. “Except for Lord Hennison. Now don’t get me wrong, he has a heart for God, but his delivery was dry compared to yours yesterday. Mother stayed home with the babies.”

“Archie couldn’t say enough good things about your preaching.”

“I appreciate the compliments.” Gabriel looked down. The little boy in his arms had fallen asleep with a tiny hand wrapped around Gabriel’s finger. “Now this little man is asleep, so I should probably leave so you can enjoy your peace and quiet.” He placed the baby back in the bassinet.

“Thank you for coming by, Mr. Morgan,” Mr. Clark said.

“You can come back and rock a baby to sleep anytime you want,” Mrs. Clark added.

“I might just do that. I am rather partial to the little lad.” Gabriel donned his hat. Leaving the humble cottage, he walked down the road headed for home. He had some work to do to prepare for next Sunday’s message. Advent was a wonderful time to be expounding on God’s truths and helping the congregants to prepare their hearts for Christmas. With renewed energy he made his way back to the vicarage.



Matilda sat in the parlour, knitting a blanket for Bennett. She’d worked on it yesterday until her hands cramped. Today she started anew. Why the rush? For some reason she was intrigued with this child even though she had been reluctant to hold it while under Gabriel’s scrutiny. She was sure he had assessed her and found her wanting of motherly instinct. Her own mother had been so distant. Even before Father’s death, Matilda had been closer to Nanny than to Mother. She’d need to overcome her fears and inadequacies if she ever hoped to be a mother herself someday.

Someday? Grandfather had already spoken about how he would employ a nurse and nanny once Bennett was weaned. Matilda would not need to help raise the child. Yet somehow, Tilly believed it should be *her* job to take care of the baby. She was the one who found him.

She wondered why all this possessiveness should overcome her now. Perhaps she feared this would be her one chance to be a mother? Given her father’s shameful actions, no man would want to wed her. She doubted even God’s love for her, in spite of her Grandfather’s words of assurance. If her own father didn’t love her enough to care for her whilst she was still under his protection, why should another man—even One Who was God?

Yet, she doubted not her grandfather’s love. He had made a provision for Mother’s and her every need. He was getting older, though. How much longer would he be alive to watch over her? What

would happen to her and her mother should Grandfather die? Money didn't meet every need. Even if Mother inherited Grandfather's home, tending to the upkeep, hiring maids and managing the finances...it all terrified her. Depending on a man in marriage was also precarious. Testimony of that was upstairs hiding in a darkened room wasting away from grief over a lost love. She had no doubt her parents adored each other. But love wasn't enough to overcome the addiction and pain that plagued her father after his injury.

To depend on anyone was dangerous, but here she was at the mercy of her grandfather's hospitality and financial support. It left her with a hopelessness above which she could not rise. Even with Christmas drawing near, the joy often associated with this season was absent.

Images of Gabriel holding that baby flashed through her memory. The loving way he nurtured the child. How would it feel to be held in his arms? Would she find comfort there as much as little Bennett had? Dangerous thoughts for a confirmed spinster.

And yet, she couldn't help but think of Gabriel's smile, energy, and the twinkle in his eyes. Nostalgia welled within as she remembered the younger version of the man who was her childhood friend. She took a deep, shuddering breath to calm her heart. It would never do to dwell on impossible dreams.

Sitting by the window overlooking the dormant garden, Matilda recalled flashes of a happier time. Meeting Gabriel by the lake trying to see who could skip a rock across the surface the farthest. The two of them riding horses along trails and taking in the beauty of the countryside. His ability to make her smile and laugh. Swims taken in the pond. Scandalous if her parents had known—he in his unmentionables and she in her camisole.

All before she'd started changing of course.

Once, he'd walked and held her hand.

"Mattie, you're my best friend. I'm off to university next week, and you'll be at boarding school. I wish we could correspond. I will miss you terribly."

"It isn't done." She pouted, already dreading their separation.

"I'll always love you. Never fear. When I return and have my career chosen, I'll seek your father's permission to court you properly."

"Court me? What if you meet someone else?"

"Do you doubt my constancy? I know my heart—there could be no one else for me but you, Mattie."

No one but Gabriel had ever used that nickname. She'd missed that. Time and circumstances had changed everything and those promises could never be expected to be kept now.

Her heart grieved another loss as she locked away her childhood memories.

On Wednesday, Matilda walked to the Clark cottage to present the soft blanket for the little boy, Bennett. She shouldn't be surprised at her grandfather taking the little child under his wing. But who would raise this boy when Grandfather was gone? It was a question she was afraid to ask. While grandfather lauded caring for widows and orphans in the present, much like her mother, herself, and this child; what of their future? It was a recurring worry.

"Oh, my. Miss Tilly this is beautiful. Thank you." Mrs. Clark said as Tilly handed over the blanket and stepped into the house. "Come in and sit down. Bennett has just been fed. Let me get him for you to hold."

"I don't—" Matilda sat and soon found the infant resting in the crook of her arm. Dark eyes peered up at her and she caressed his soft dark hair. "He's so soft."

"Aye, babies are a blessing. That wee lad was found by God's grace. Praise be to Him for bringing you and Mr. Morgan to find him as you did. That church gets cold, and the child hardly wore a thing. He wouldn't have survived long."

Tilly's heart swelled and she blinked back tears. "It would have been heartbreaking to have found him too late."

A knock at the door had Mrs. Clark jumping to her feet. Tilly found a little hand gripping her finger. The baby's lips opened as if he were going to talk. A soft *ahh* came from his lips. "Good morrow, Bennett. I'm glad we found you in time," she whispered.

"Ah, I see you also have come to check on our little boy." Gabriel's entrance attracted her attention.

Our? She gulped.

He sat next to her, his shoulder touching hers as he bent his head to look at the infant. "He sure is a handsome lad."

Confusion swirled with a deep wanting within her. Wanting for what? She had never held a baby before today, and the reality she would never enjoy marriage and child of her own battled with the fantasy that she could have a marital future with her childhood friend. But he'd grown into a man. A man who served God. He would never accept her. The church had refused bury her father on consecrated ground. They'd condemned him to hell and denied him a spot in the church cemetery. Thankfully, grandfather had stepped in and buried his son-in-law on his own property, citing that God had mercy on hurting souls and therefore they should too. But how would a clergyman ever consider the daughter of one deemed bound for the netherworld? Her fantasy would remain thus. Reality would never match it.

Gabriel shifted his head as he cooed to the baby. The man's hair smelled divine. She was tempted to touch it to see if it were as soft as the baby's. "...don't you think, Miss Wilcox?" Gabriel said.

"I'm sorry, I was woolgathering. I didn't hear you."

Gabriel's blue eyes twinkled with mischief. "I don't hold your attention? I've been supplanted in your affections by Bennett?"

"Mr. Morgan!" Tilly hissed as she noticed Mrs. Clark's eyebrows rise. "Mr. Morgan grew up next to my father's estate so we once knew each other when we were children. Before boarding school for me and university for him," she explained.

"Ah, but one never forgets one's best friend, do they? Even after years have passed." Gabriel winked at her.

"I should be going now. Thank you for allowing me to visit unannounced." Tilly handed the baby to Mrs. Clark and rose to her feet, grabbing her shawl.

"Thank you for the beautiful blanket for Bennett. With such loving gifts, he'll hopefully never sense how cast upon the world he was."

You mean abandoned. Tilly nodded and wrapped her shawl around herself.

Gabriel rose as well and grabbed his hat. "Since the children are asleep we'll depart so you can rest. I shall see Miss Wilcox home."

Mrs. Clark beamed at them and let out a little sigh.

Lovely! Now the gossip mongers would swirl rumors of her and the clergyman stepping out together. "I can see myself home, Mr. Morgan. You needn't trouble yourself over me."

"A gentleman can do no less for a lady." Turning he gave a nod to Mrs. Clark. "Good day, ma'am."

She waved to them as they stepped out into the crisp December day. The wind whipped Tilly's skirts around her ankles sending a shiver up her spine.

"Are you cold or was that because you dislike being near an old friend?"

"It's nippy out."

He nodded. "If you're sure"

"You set the rooster amongst the henhouse by intimating a relationship between us."

A slight grin accompanied a raised eyebrow. "Did I? How careless of me."



Gabriel fought the larger grin threatening to emerge. Did she really mind his insinuation? It was difficult to tell if she was blushing given the cold temperature, but the way she averted her gaze led him to suspect she wasn't as opposed to his words as she might have indicated. There was still a bit of the childhood scamp in him, but

perhaps the reminder of how well they got along in days past would open the door for Tilly to consider him as a suitor. Perhaps then the other young ladies in the parish would cease pursuing him. Her scold delighted him. It was the first bit of spirit he'd seen in her. The childhood playmate he remembered had not been so serious.

"You comprehend what you did. What game are you playing at Gabriel?" She stopped and her gaze met and held his.

"It isn't a game, Mattie. Remember when we were children? I promised you then that someday I would marry you."

She turned away and hurried past him. The wind whipped her dress so he caught a glimpse of her ankles. He rushed to catch up and then grabbed her arm. "Mattie. You were my best friend. Convention dictated that we could not correspond unless engaged, so I know naught of what has happened to you. That does not mean I forgot you or the rapport we once shared. I've prayed for you and wondered."

She stopped for a moment glancing down at his arm. He let go. She swallowed hard. "Surely you've been informed by your family or someone here about what happened. Childhood promises are not something one holds on to."

"I do."

"You sought this parish on purpose."

Gabriel lifted his hand and turned her face to his as a tear escaped make its descent down her cheek. "Aw, Mattie. I've only ever loved you. I'm sorry about what happened to your father, but it has nothing to do with my affection for you."

She sniffed and began walking again. "Does my grandfather know of our connection?" He fell into step beside her.

"Yes. I spoke to him extensively after we found a home for baby Bennett."

"Gabriel, you are incorrigible. What is it you want from me?"

"I wish to court you."

"I'm past the marriageable age. Firmly on the shelf. A spinster. Not to mention the daughter of a damned man."

"Maybe that's the way others see you, and all the better for me that they do. My deepest fear was that someone would discover the treasure you are and snatch you before I could claim you."

"Claim me? Am I now some prize?" She stalked off.

"You are precious to me." He matched her brisk pace.

"Foolish talk."

"How could I convince you that I'm sincere?" They were at the house now, and she turned toward him.

"I don't know that you can, Gabriel."

With that parting salvo, she walked up the steps. The door opened, admitting her, and she disappeared from sight.

Gabriel sighed as he turned to walk back to his home. He wasn't quite sure how to break down the walls Mattie had erected around her heart, but he knew the One who did.



Gabriel studied Scripture to prepare for Sunday. God's Word held power. *God, I cannot manipulate You to do as I desire, but I pray You would give me the desires that are in accord with Your will. If my desire to wed Mattie is wrong, please take it from me and school my heart to consider her only as a friend. I want the wife You believe would be best for me. But could it please be her?*

Was it wrong that he prayed for the words he spoke on Sunday not only to draw Matilda to the Lord but also to pave the way for her heart to warm to his?

An invitation arrived on Thursday for Gabriel to join Lord Hennison and his family for dinner. Gabriel admired the man and his quiet, dignified faith...and he'd see Mattie again.

With happy anticipation, he strode up the walk to the house. Would Tilly be cool and aloof as she was at first, or would he witness more maidenly blushes. He suspected she was not as unaffected by his presence as she pretended.

The butler opened the door, and after taking his coat and hat, he motioned Gabriel to the drawing room. "Mr. Morgan," the man intoned.

Gabriel strode forward. "Lord Hennison. Thank you for your kind invitation."

The older man held up a small glass. "Some brandy to warm you after your walk?"

"It would not go amiss. Thank you."

Lord Hennison poured a glass and brought it to him. "The ladies always go for tea to get warm, but this works fine for me. My granddaughter, however, frowns on it."

Gabriel took a sip and savored the rich flavor. "Why?"

"Because her father used to numb his pain after his injury, with copious amounts of alcohol. And now his widow, my daughter, hides in her room."

"Will Mrs. Wilcox be joining us this evening?"

"It is rare for her to leave her rooms. If she does come down it will be a surprise to us all."

Gabriel took another sip and considered the amber liquid in the glass. Would this be another barrier to his courtship of Mattie? Would she shut him down for a small glass of brandy or for Port after dinner? He never used in excess and didn't relish losing control, so other than an occasional social event, he didn't imbibe. Alcohol was a luxury he chose to defer.

The door opened and in swept Matilda. His heart swelled at the sight of her. Demure in her attire, she wore a deep plum gown with a lighter colored shawl. That silly cap still rested on her head. As if she could hide her beauty from him—or anyone. Color rose in her cheeks and she bit her lower lip when she spied the glass in his hands.

“Come near, my dear,” her grandfather summoned.

Mattie obeyed. “Good eve, Mr. Morgan.”

Gabriel tipped his head. “You look lovely tonight, Miss Wilcox. In the church, purple is often a color associated with the season of advent. It is a color that becomes you, but I am terribly sorry for the loss that gives you reason to wear it.”

“Thank you.” She turned to her grandfather. “Mother will not join us this evening. Her megrim is much worse. She declares a storm is on the horizon.”

Lord Hennison frowned. “I cannot say I’m surprised. Our numbers will be uneven but we shall have an enjoyable meal, regardless.”

The butler came to announce dinner was ready. Lord Hennison nodded to Gabriel, gave a quick flash of his eyes to Matilda, and turned to leave the room. Gabriel walked up to Miss Wilcox and offered her his arm. She placed her hand on it and side by side they followed her grandfather into the dining room.

Gabriel helped Matilda into her chair on Lord Hennison’s right and then walked around to sit on their host’s left.

As the meal began, more general topics were discussed, but then Lord Hennison took a more personal bent. “Will you be able to visit your family during the Christmas season?”

Gabriel frowned and took a sip of water. “They are aware that my new duties will keep me from them over the holidays.”

“But it’s Christmas,” Mattie protested. “Surely you could find time to go visit.”

Picking up his fork again he stabbed a piece of roasted rabbit, and then stopped to consider the outburst from the woman sitting across from him. “Christmas is a time for family, true, but my calling is here. This parish is my responsibility. The holidays, while joyous, can also be one of the most heartbreaking times of the year for many. Should I abandon those who are suffering so I may enjoy comfort?”

Mattie’s gaze fell to her plate, and she sighed. “I’m not sure how festive this holiday will be here.”

Grandfather’s face paled and his hand shook causing his fork to drop onto the plate.

“No offense, Grandfather. Pray forgive me. We weren’t able to come last year and then when Father... You’ve tried your best. Mr. Morgan is correct that this season can be difficult for many.”

Lord Hennison cleared his throat. “You are forgiven, Tilly. This last

year has been especially difficult for you. We all have choices to make. While I don't deny that grief and melancholy can make those more difficult, we can fight for joy in the midst of that if we choose.

"It wasn't an easy time for Joseph and Mary either. They had to leave family take a long journey, most likely on foot, to Bethlehem. Mary was due to give birth, but she did not have the luxury of her mother by her side and then not even a comfortable bed with which to labor. I can imagine Joseph struggling to feel adequate in the face of all that, knowing the child to be born was the Savior of the world.

"He made a choice to wed the virgin mother. He didn't have to." Lord Hennison picked up his fork.

"Now you come to the crux of the matter, my lord," Gabriel answered. "Joseph loved Mary. It had to be humiliating socially for him to wed her when she was already with child, and it wasn't his. Even with an angel appearing, I wonder if he had doubts—about Mary, the babe, and even his own sanity—yet he acted in obedience to God and in defiance of the law that dictated her death. He stood in as a foster father to the Messiah. I can't imagine how confusing that would have been. He was a carpenter. A hardworking, devout, Jewish man. His life took an uncomfortable turn, yet he embraced it and did what God asked of him."

Lord Hennison nodded. "How much more do we need to seek and heed God's call, even when it is not comfortable."

"Surely, God did not want to be born amongst farm animals!" Matilda protested.

"How can we say otherwise when that is exactly what happened? He created them before He created man. An infant cares not where he is as long as he is cared for and loved. Jesus was fully human as well as divine. His most basic needs were met." Gabriel gazed at the young woman across from him.

"Sometimes, basic needs being met is not enough."

Gabriel grinned. "True. Because we are not just mortal men, but also created for a relationship with the One True God. When we find our peace with Him, even though life be hard, it also contains joy. The angels sang "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

"Good will toward men? So how can such a glorious God leave a baby stranded in a church, my mother insensible with grief for months on end in her bed and me—"

"What about you, Miss Wilcox?" Gabriel inquired.

Lord Hennison's eyelids drooped as he grabbed his wine goblet. His granddaughter's complaint turned his face gaunt with grief.

Tilly set down her fork. "I apologize, Grandfather. You have been gracious in providing a home for Mother and me. You provide

generously for an orphaned child when you have no heir of your own. You are a man to be admired and emulated.”

The older man nodded. “What you lack, dear Matilda, is not something I can give you. The peace Gabriel speaks of is given only by God.”

Silence settled over the table. Gabriel’s heart ached for Tilly’s pain. The unrelenting shame of her father’s suicide combined with grief over losing him to death and her mother to mourning. Then to believe that she herself was beyond being desired and loved? She saw only a lonely future stretched before her when Gabriel longed for so much more for her.

He glimpsed the hopelessness within her as her gaze sought his. Where were his wonderful words of exhortation now? Where was the confident clergyman in this moment?

Instead it was the heart of a friend who ached with the pain that shrouded this home.

The meal ended in uncomfortable silence.

“I’ll leave you men to your port.”

Lord Hennison rose as did Gabriel when she stood.

“My dear, we will forgo that tradition to join you in the drawing room.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Grandfather, Mr. Morgan. I believe I shall retire for the night. Forgive me for ruining the evening.” She exited the room and the men sat.

Lord Hennison sighed deeply as he motioned for a footman to fill his glass. Gabriel waved off the man, forgoing the wine. The comfort he longed for was not to be found in a beverage.

“I apologize for my granddaughter’s outburst. It is quite unlike her.” The older man studied Gabriel who met his gaze without flinching.

“Now you understand what I’m dealing with here. Are you still desirous of courting Matilda?”

Gabriel nodded. “Your granddaughter and I were childhood friends. Finding her living here was a surprise blessing, a hope I’d long coveted and given up on. I have always loved her, my lord. I have prayed and am continuing to seek God. I long to court her. She needs to find the peace she once knew with Him before she could ever accept my love as true.”

“You are wise beyond your years, Mr. Morgan. I will pray that your suit will prosper in time. It is after all, Advent. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will open her eyes to embrace that gift God has given.”

“And I am tasked with presenting that to her and your congregation in the weeks and months ahead. I pray God will speak His truth through me. There is naught I can do myself but study and

seek Him first.”

“There is a wonder and miracle in the birth of a child. She told me she visited Bennett this week and that you came too.”

“I’ve seen the little one several times. He prospers under the Clark’s care.”

“He would do better with a mother and father of his own. That is something I cannot provide.”

“You have done more than many would have.”

“God has His plans. I wish He’d keep me informed as to what they are.”

Gabriel grinned. “Ah, but then what need would there be for faith?”

Tilly hoped Gabriel would stop in the church. When she finished decorating the altar with fresh flowers, she sat in the pew near where Bennett was found. It seemed as though her life and heart had been tossed asunder of late. Her childhood friend was so close, challenging her. And then there was the baby. Her heart ached for little Bennett. When she'd visited a day ago, she longed for Gabriel to be with her gazing down and the beauty of the little boy. What would it be like to experience that with a husband? The joy of new life. A family of her own. And why could she only imagine that with Gabriel?

Stop it.

Futile thoughts would not bring her the peace she sought. Tired of waiting for him to show up, she left the building. She glanced over to his home and spied a young woman, Miss Deveroux, leaving. A newer family to the neighborhood, they were landed gentry, but held themselves with as much dignity as any lord or lady would. Matilda hadn't spoken much with the oldest daughter of the family, but seeing her leave the vicarage without a chaperone, stirred emotions in her of which she was unfamiliar.

Gabriel wasn't hers to claim. But it galled her that he would so openly and inappropriately meet with a young woman unchaperoned. It simply wasn't done. She huffed and, embracing the strong wind, strode home with a bit more force to her steps than usual. It did nothing to relieve the energy swirling inside. Disappointment with her childhood friend. Jealousy? Anger that he was not true to her as he'd claimed.

Arriving at the house, she walked around to the garden. Many of the plants were dead, yet there, on a trellis bloomed a pale pink rose. Beauty in the midst of death. She drew near and inhaled the perfume. Did she dare cut it to carry it inside, or should she allow it to succumb to the cold? Either way it would die.

The ache in her heart would not be satisfied. Blinking back tears, she walked into the house, her thoughts firmly fixed on Gabriel. She dared not reach for her heart's desire with the death that surrounded her. Much like that rose, he bloomed with life and color in the midst of the darkness. He offered her his heart. But if she plucked it, his heart would die, too...just as the rose would if she cut it. If she wanted the vibrancy to last, she would have to be content enjoying the beauty from afar. Not that he would want anything to do with her after her unseemly outburst at dinner. His tête-à-tête with the comely Miss Deveroux indicated as much.

Not that she could blame him. Even if he were able to overlook the shame carried by her father's choice, the fact that she had shown

herself publicly to be unrefined would clearly disqualify her from being an acceptable choice for the wife of a clergyman.

She'd been surprised that Grandfather had not taken her to task for behavior at dinner. He didn't need to. Tilly was well able to torture herself for her outspoken rudeness. She had yet to apologize to both men.

Entering her room, she cast off her cloak and hat. She patted her hair making sure her cap was in place, and made her way to Grandfather's study. A knock on the door was followed by a soft "Come in!"

Grandfather looked up from his desk and upon seeing her put his pen back in its place and rose to his feet. "Tilly. You've returned from church. Did you see Mr. Morgan?"

Matilda stepped further into the room and went to the fire to warm up. "He was not there."

Silence hung between them. Tilly turned and walked over to him. "I'm sorry for the way I behaved at dinner the other night. I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me."

Grandfather strode forward and clasped her hands in his, shaking his head. "I already forgave you. But why apologize for sharing your heart and your pain? Mr. Morgan is a shepherd, and he has come to help all of us."

"What can he do?"

"Listen, comfort, pray, and point us back to the Hope of the world."

She nodded and swallowed hard. "I owe him an apology, too."

"Do as you feel you must. I admire the young man. I would not be opposed to a match between the two of you."

She pulled her hands away. "Grandfather!" Her eyes wide, she strode away. "Is this why you chose him? You knew of our childhood friendship?"

"He approached me after he found you here. He took a leap of faith in giving up a parish closer to his family, only to find you here after the fact. It wasn't his plan. He was honest with me about his history with you and his hopes. He spent a month fasting and praying about whether God wanted him here before he accepted the living."

"So now even God is conspiring against me?"

Lord Hennison shook his head and drew near, placing a hand on her shoulder. "No, dear Tilly. You still have choices before you as we all do. I have my hopes and dreams. Gabriel has his, and you have yours. How God will use that for His glory, I know not."

Tilly shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Maybe you should ask someone who does."

"Like who?" Jaw clenched she turned to face her grandfather. She

swallowed her anger lest she say something she might regret. She didn't need to apologize over and over when she possessed the ability to act the lady.

Grandfather pointed up.

"God?"

"Seek Him, my dear. He promises that if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. But beware. There is an enemy that would deny you that truth and comfort."

Tilly walked toward the door. She had no words but glanced back at her grandfather and gave him a nod before she departed and sought her room. Her brain was a knot of thoughts that would take time to untangle.

Even if God opened her heart to Gabriel, she feared he had already moved on.



Gabriel rose and stretched early Sunday morning. Rising from bed he dropped to his knees to pray. *Dearest Lord Jesus, open Mattie's heart to Thy love again so she can walk in Thy confidence and truth. Let me be a mere reflection of Thy truth and grace as I preach Thy Word to the flock You have entrusted to me. I cannot do this without Thou.* He remained on his knees for some time in silent reflection, and a sense of peace surrounded him.

He finally rose to dress. Descending the stairs and entered the kitchen to prepare and enjoy a simple breakfast as he gave his servant's the Sabbath off. After washing his dishes, he went to his study to grab his Bible, prayer book, and notes for the service. As he strode to the church, he prayed that he would not be distracted by the young woman sitting in the front pew.

He led the prayers and finally opened God's Word and began to expound about the wonder of the coming Messiah. Periodically he sought Mattie to see her reaction. Was he inspiring hope in spite of her circumstances? He chided himself for being distracted by her as he preached. He continued to expound on the coming King, not just at Christmas as a babe, but as He would come as the triumphant Lord of lords and King of kings. No one would escape bowing before His grandeur. Gabriel wound down his message and finished with prayer.

Dismissing the congregation, he strode to the back of the church and congregants began to line up to leave, children running out the door for the freedom to move and make noise they'd been denied inside.

Gabriel smiled at their enthusiasm.

Lord Hennison approached and shook his head at the antics of the kids as their parents tried to corral them to go home as others stood talking. "To have that energy again..."

“Life was a glorious thing and should be embraced fully,” Gabriel responded, shaking his benefactor’s hand before greeting his heart’s desire. “Miss Wilcox. Thank you again for decorating the altar. Our Lord loves beauty, and those flowers emphasized that.” He hoped his gaze told her how much he appreciated her own beauty.

“It was my pleasure. Your message today...gave me much to think about.”

“I pray for you often, Mattie,” he whispered. “I could do no less for someone I love.”

A pretty pink suffused her cheeks as she pulled her hand from his. He watched her take her grandfather’s arm and head to their carriage.



Throughout the next week, wherever Gabriel went, he’d learn that Tilly had been there before him, and he’d missed her. Any hopes of running into her were crushed. Back at Mrs. Clark’s he held little Bennett once again.

“He seems to be growing,” Gabriel noted.

“Aye, and between you and Miss Wilcox, he’s been getting more love than I alone can provide. You’ve both been good for him. Children need love and touch as much as food and water.”

Gabriel nodded. “Tis true. So Miss Wilcox has continued to visit?”

“Almost every day she comes and brings something for me and our home. Such sorrow hangs around her, but when she holds that babe...”

“Children are a blessing.” Gabriel sighed. Was Mattie avoiding him? Did she study his schedule? It seemed that every day as he visited members of the parish, he would hear repeated tales of Miss Wilcox having visited or provided aid for some need he’d not known about. As the child snuggled in his arms, he wondered about the lad’s future. Once he was weaned, how would Lord Hennison provide care for him? Financial provisions for the child were assured, but who would love and care for him physically when Miss Clark was done as a nurse maid?

Would Mattie raise the child? And what would happen to them when Lord Hennison, already an older man, passed on? They would be adrift in the world. How far did caring for widows and orphans extend?



Tilly deliberately avoided Gabriel. She’d learned from his cook that he spent his mornings studying and praying, so she chose those times to go about the village on her errands of mercy. She wondered if he spent time at the Deveroux home. Was he dining there and courting the young lady? As a third son, it was a respectable match, but she

thought the Deveroux might be holding out for a title and would likely be heading London in the spring for the season.

Tilly had never experienced more than local balls and entertainments. The City was a foreign land to her. She doubted she was missing much. Here in Corby was where real living took place. Where people worked and struggled week-to-week to provide and care for their families and neighbors.

She sighed as she sat doing her mending. While a maid could do such, she liked the busy work. Much better than pacing or trying to coax her mother out of her room. Only two more Sundays before Christmas Eve. She'd already started to prepare gifts for the servants for Stephen's Day, the day after Christmas. The twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany had always been a time of celebration in their home—before the accident. This would be their first year without her father, but he'd emotionally abandoned them months before his physical death. His descent into depression had been rapid. His death—unexpected.

As if anyone anticipated death or had it scheduled into their calendar. *Silly girl.* Grandfather would likely remind her that God controlled when a person died. But God also gave people the opportunity to make choices. Even bad choices. How could a good God do that? She couldn't reconcile the holy, sovereign, omniscient King of the universe, allowing bad things.

Especially when it hurt others.

Like Bennett. What had happened to his parents? They'd yet to find them and likely never would.

But I led you to him just in time.

She turned to look around. There was no one there but she could have sworn she heard a voice speaking. Now she was losing her own sanity! She recognized that melancholy plagued her as much as it did her mother. Instead of embracing and giving into it, however, she tried to bury it with busyness. Grandfather said God wanted to meet her in her pain. Well, then, where was He?

I sent you help. Take what's offered.

She slammed her sewing into the basket at her feet and stood to look around. She hadn't been speaking out loud, so how could someone be talking to her unseen. Or had she descended into madness?

"What help? What offer?" There was no one there, but that didn't stop her from talking back. "True, we found Bennett, barely in time, but now what?" She stomped her foot as she'd done as a toddler trying to get her way. "Oh, I am so vexed! Show yourself!"

I did. If people didn't accept me then, what makes you think you'd do so now?

She blinked rapidly. Her heart raced. "God?" Was God speaking to her? How could she know? Whom could she ask?

Gabriel. She closed her eyes and sank into her chair, defeated. Tears coursed down her cheeks. "Please don't make me see him. I simply couldn't..."

Couldn't what? Bare her soul? Confess her lack of faith? Accept his spiritual help knowing he'd already moved on to someone else. Could she really trust her friend with her broken and twisted heart?

What other choice did she have?



The next day Matilda trod to the church to decorate again. Her spirit grew heavy with every step she took. Would she see Gabriel? She equally hoped and feared so. She possessed only darkness to hand a man who lived bathed in light and grace.

She stepped into the dim church as the sun hid behind the clouds and rain threatened.

She threw out the dead flowers from last week and put the fresh ones in the vases. Was God pleased with her offering? She sat in the pew she would occupy on the morrow and closed her eyes.



Gabriel spied Matilda entering the church and finished writing some notes for the Sunday service. He set down his pen. Should he go to her? She'd obviously been avoiding him, but he wasn't sure why. He rose with a sigh and grabbed his greatcoat, hat and gloves and walked over to the church. He slipped in the back door quietly. The flowers were arranged on the altar bringing joy into a darkened room. Had he missed her?

A snuffle directed his voice to the Hennison pew. He slowly strode forward while reaching for his handkerchief. She was still here. Hope rose in his chest even as his heart ached for her suffering. As he came alongside the bench, he cleared his throat but focused his gaze on the cross at the front of the church. He stretched out his arm and presented the cloth, and out of the corner of his eye he watched her take it from him.

A nose blew.

"May I join you?"

"It's your church, you can do what you want," Tilly replied with a shaky breath.

"No. The church is dedicated to God and consists of the people who make it up. This building belongs to us all." He sat but kept several inches away from her. A shiver ran up his spine at the cold in the building. "Are you warm enough?"

She shrugged, staring down at the handkerchief as she twisted it in

her hand.

"I'm a good listener," Gabriel offered.

She nodded. "I remember. But these are not childhood ramblings that occupy my thoughts."

"It matters not to me. I am at your disposal."

"You are too good to me, Gabriel."

He didn't respond. He was afraid she'd bolt if he told her once again that he longed to have her as his wife. *Slow down. Wait.* That's the message God had been telling him.

She turned toward him. "I think God is talking to me."

Interesting. "And?"

"I don't know. He told me to talk to you, but I don't know if I have the courage to tell you what's on my mind and heart."

Compassion welled within, and he slid closer, reaching a hand to encompass one of hers. "We used to be friends, telling each other everything. Surely you realize I care and would listen. Unless you plan to tell me you're wearing a pet chicken on your head to church tomorrow, I probably won't laugh at you."

She gave a small chuckle. "You always could make me laugh. You have a gift, Gabriel. Everywhere I go I hear of how wonderful you are in the way you minister to people's emotional and spiritual needs."

"You also have a gift, Mattie. I hear wonderful things of you of how you know just what physical needs will minister most to those around you. And you deliver those gifts personally and visit in each home, listening and loving others. Many would send a servant to do those tasks."

She nodded. "I need to stay busy, lest I become like my mother."

He frowned. "In what way?"

"I fight the darkness. The weight of shame at Father's death. My utter dependence on my Grandfather, the loss of my mother to grief. I long to escape it all. When I visit others, I don't dwell on those truths."

"Why do you think your father's death overshadows your own happiness?"

She left the handkerchief on her lap as her other hand clasped his, holding him tight. Her touch elicited tingles in him. He slid a little closer.

"My father didn't love me enough to stay. My mother loved my father too much and cannot live without him. I lost her to melancholy once we found him. I'm firmly on the shelf, and when my grandfather dies, I'll be truly alone in the world. An orphan much like little Bennett is. And what will become of him?"

"You worry about the child?"

A snuffle and nod was his answer. "I didn't want to share all this

with you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are all that is good and pure and light. And I understand, after my unseemly display of public emotion, why you’ve moved on. There are other women around who do not carry my shame who would make a far better wife to one such as you. I don’t want my darkness to overshadow your ministry.”

“Other women? I know naught of what you speak.”

“Miss Deveroux. I saw her leaving your house last Saturday when I came to decorate the church.”

Gabriel searched his memory. “Saturday? I’d left town Friday night and spent most of Saturday in Kettering visiting with a colleague. If Miss Deveroux visited, I was not at home to receive her, nor would I without a chaperone.”

“Oh.”

“I have my own darkness, Mattie. No one goes through life unscathed, or at least very few do.”

“Really? What happened to you?”

“A few things, really. My college roommate died in a duel over a woman. We had been close friends.”

“Were you his second?”

Gabriel shook his head. “No. He knew better than to even ask it of me. He knew I would not approve.”

“You said a few things.”

“I struggled once I finished university. Where did God want me? I missed you. You were my one constant friend growing up. I guess I thought you’d always be there waiting for me when I completed my studies and was ready to be ordained. Your family had moved but I could not find where you’d gone. I wondered if you had married already. Was I too late?”

“I’ve not been nice to you. You deserve better.” A shuddering breath overcame Mattie, and he pulled his hand from her grasp to wrap it around her instead, drawing her to his side. He reached out with his other hand to hold hers.

“You were hurting. You still are.”

“But now, knowing the truth, you’ve learned how hopeless it is for there to be anything between us.”

“I know nothing of the sort. My heart still longs only for you. I’ve asked God to make it clear—to take away my longing for you—if it wasn’t His will.”

“And?”

“Instead it grows stronger every time I’m near you.”

“Utter nonsense.”

“Is it, Mattie? Can you tell me you feel nothing when we touch?”

Matilda sighed and leaned into Gabriel's strength. She inhaled his clean scent, and the sun broke through the clouds scattering light across the front of the church. "I feel—"

His head bent as he placed a kiss on her hair. "I long to place those kisses elsewhere, my dear."

She nodded and turned to look up at him. Would he kiss her here? They were all alone in the church. Suddenly shy, she pulled away, afraid of how much she longed for him in spite of her unworthiness. "I must go." Rising to her feet she strode to the back door leaving Gabriel behind. It didn't matter what she felt for him. It could never be right, could it?

She walked home at a rapid pace, partly to escape herself and partly to keep warm. Her toes were already numb in her half-boots. The threatening rain broke loose in a short burst, drenching her before she could get to the front door. She strode in, dripping wet, and removed her cloak, gloves and hat.

Simon took her things. "Would you like me to call a maid to have a bath drawn?"

She nodded. "And a hot cup of tea to my rooms would not go amiss either." She sneezed.

"Bless you, miss."

"Thank you, Simon." She scampered up the stairs to her room and sat to take off her boots and wet stockings. She stirred the fireplace and came close to warm up. Funny how she'd never felt chilled when Gabriel was next to her. It was as if his faith was big enough to warm both of them.

Silly thoughts, weren't they? She sipped her tea as buckets of water were brought in for her bath. A maid selected a wool gown for when she was finished. Slipping into the perfumed water, Tilly sighed. Her cold body shivered against the hot water. Perhaps a nap would be in order. Anything to turn off her ruminations of Gabriel and dreams that could never come true.



Gabriel stood in front of the church on Sunday morning and an empty pew confronted him. He fought the worry that threatened to distract him from the message he needed give as he led the worship service.

Somehow, he managed to muddle through, but as he stood at the back to the church greeting the villagers who attended, he couldn't remember anything he'd said. He responded mechanically to the people with whom he was only just becoming acquainted. Once they were gone he walked to his home and fixed a simple lunch. Cleaning

up after himself he paced and prayed. Should he go to visit to discover if everyone was well? He couldn't imagine Lord Hennison skipping services for anything other than illness or death.

Please, Lord, let Mattie be well.

Unable to settle himself he grabbed his coat, hat and gloves and went to the stable where he kept one horse. He saddled her and rode out to the Hennison home.

Leaving the horse with a groom, Gabriel took the front steps two at a time before coming to the door and knocking. At least no black ribbon indicated a death. "Is Miss Wilcox or Lord Hennison available?"

The butler granted him entrance. "I'll take you to Lord Hennison."

Gabriel followed the man to a study. Inside he found Lord Hennison sitting by the fire, but the man made no acknowledgement.

"My lord, is all well?" Gabriel asked as he approached his patron.

"Tilly is ill." Sad eyes glanced to Gabriel. "She's my sunshine. What would I do without her?"

"Have you been able to rest?"

The older man shook his head. "I've paced and prayed all night long. The doctor says she has an inflammation of the lungs."

Terror shook Gabriel. His grandmother, whom he adored, had died from such an illness. "But surely she'll recover. She is young."

"The doctor will make no promises."

"May I see her?"

"You would risk contracting the illness, Mr. Morgan. 'Twould not be a wise thing to do."

"When your wife was ill—did you stay away?"

Old eyes gazed at Gabriel. "I barely left her side...I was there when she passed. But Matilda isn't your wife."

"That doesn't mean I love her any less."

Lord Hennison nodded. "You may visit her."

"Thank you."

The older man rang for a servant, and Simon appeared.

"Find one of the maids and have her show Mr. Morgan to Miss Tilly's rooms." He waved them both off.

Gabriel rose and followed the servant.

A maid dusting in the next room walked with him above stairs and took him to Matilda's bedroom. She opened the door and another maid rose to her feet.

"Lord Hennison has permitted me to visit Miss Wilcox."

The maid sat as the other left, shutting the door behind her. The room was wreathed in shadows. He strode over to large bed and Matilda reclined, propped up on pillows. Her face was damp with sweat and her hair plaited in the back.

“Mattie?” Gabriel pulled a chair close and reached for her limp hand.

“Hmmm?” Tilly started coughing but it soon subsided. “Water.”

Gabriel grabbed the glass on the table nearby and lifted it to her lips.

She turned her head away when she was done. “Thank you.”

Glassy eyes turned his way. “Gabriel?”

“Yes, it’s me. I missed you in church this morning.”

“Am I on my deathbed that the minister comes to visit me?”

He shook his head and gave a small grin. “You are not well, and I care deeply for you. That alone is what brings me here.”

“You should leave so you don’t get sick, too.”

“I’m not that easy to get rid of.”

“Like fleas on a dog.”

Gabriel grinned. “There’s that sense of humor I’ve been missing.”

“Are you saying I’m dull?”

“No. I simply remember a young girl full of hope and joy. I miss her.”

“Me too. I think she died a year ago.”

“I believe God can bring her back to life.”

“Talking hurts.” She closed her eyes. “I’m glad you came.”

He squeezed her hand, and she returned the gesture. Bending his head, Gabriel began to plead with God to spare Matilda’s life and restore her to health...as well as to the joy she once exhibited...and that if that not be His will, that He would give Gabriel the courage to face that kind of future...

Picking up a clean cloth, he dipped it in a basin of cool water, squeezed it and proceeded to blot Mattie’s overheated face in an effort to provide comfort. Her sigh and slight smile were all the encouragement he needed to remain by her side for the rest of the night.



Tilly’s head throbbed and her chest ached with every breath. Unlike her childhood illnesses where a nurse cared for her, this time she was wrapped in a cocoon of love. How could that be? *God are Thou really here with me in the midst of this?*

“Come on, sweetheart, take a sip.”

A hand supported her head as something touched her parched lips. Warm broth trickled down her throat, and she could have sighed in bliss if she weren’t eager for more as it soothed her throat and calmed the spasms in her lungs. The cup pulled away, and the hand gently left her head to rest against a pillow. A soft damp cloth touched her face. *Ahh, yes. Thank Thou, Lord for not abandoning me.*



Her eyes awoke to sunshine streaming in the windows. A maid rushed forward. "Miss, would you like a bath brought up for you?"

Tilly nodded. "Please." She struggled to throw off her quilt and stumbled to the withdrawing space. Walking slowly back into the main room she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her face was pale and her hair frizzled around her face, coming out of its braid. She untied the ribbon and slowly unwound the hair and began to comb it out.

The bath was soon filled, and Tilly sank into the water and sighed as she closed her eyes. She washed her hair, and after she was out of the basin and dressed, she sat by the fire to let the long locks dry.

A knock came to the door. "Come in!" her voice cracked and she wondered if the person even heard her words. The door opened and her grandfather entered.

"How are you, my dear? I was never so grateful as when I heard your fever broke."

"I'm weak and tired but my head doesn't ache and I can breathe without pain or coughing."

He nodded. "Good." He sat across from her.

"For how long was I ill?"

"Several days."

"What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"I need to get flowers to church."

"It's already been taken care of, my dear."

She scrunched her eyes. "By whom?"

"I sent one of the footmen."

"They know nothing of arranging flowers."

"Gabriel assured me that his housekeeper could handle that part of it while you recovered."

"But Christmas is only a few days away."

"Yes."

"I suppose I should eat and rest so I can attend church in the morning."

"I don't think you should go."

"Has the doctor forbidden it?"

"He will be here in an hour or so. He believes your recovery to be a miracle."

Perhaps it is. Tilly sighed. "I suppose I should rest?"

The doctor entered the room. "After you eat something. Living on broth and water for days doesn't give you much strength. But start with something light."

Lord Hennison rose. "She finally awoke and got out of bed."

“I can see that.” The doctor came to feel her forehead.



Gabriel paced back and forth in his study, praying. He'd returned home only once it was clear Matilda was on the mend. Fatigue weighed him down, but he needed to preach tomorrow morning. What did he have to give? What did God want him to say?

Just rest.

He sighed. *Just rest?* He shrugged. He wasn't getting anything accomplished here at the moment. A yawn overtook him, so he banked the fire in his study and took the stairs to his room. If God wanted him to rest, he wouldn't argue. "If you could wake me up in time to make it to church in the morning, I'd appreciate it." Boots coat and waistcoat shed, he slipped under the covers. A dreamless sleep overtook him.

In the morning, Gabriel awoke earlier than normal, but fatigue still weighed heavy. He shaved, dressed and went to eat a simple breakfast before heading to his study to pray and seek God.

When the time came, he strode to church. Lord Hennison was there with Mattie. Should she even be out of the house? Was she well enough for this? In spite of his concerns he rejoiced in seeing her. Turning to the congregation, he began an opening hymn, and before he knew it, it was time for his message.

"This is the last Sunday of Advent. In a few days, we celebrate the birth our Savior. Imagine those last days as Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem. Mary was heavy with child. Perhaps they had a donkey to carry their belongings. Joseph was plagued with concern for his wife. All people around them were traveling to the same place. Where would they all rest? Blisters on their feet. Possibly sunburned. Definitely tired. They had no idea of what awaited them.

"To arrive in a town that teemed with people jostling about trying to find warmth, shelter, and food, the young couple found themselves forced to lodge with animals.

"All of this in preparation for the long-awaited Messiah?

"How much more should we wait on God, trusting Him, and His Word, when we are weary, tired, and without hope? Mary carried the hope of the world within her, but we do as well. Were they abandoned in their time of need? From our perspective, it might seem so. But, did Joseph question God about the timing of all of this?

"No. He obeyed God, even in the midst of uncertainty and hardship, and look where that brought them. We'll look more at this on Christmas Eve, but for now I want to leave you with this question: Do you hold that hope inside you? Is it ready to burst forth even if your current circumstances are not perfect? Are we willing to accept that our Lord might do mighty things even now when we are at our

weakest and have no control over events around us?"

He led in a hymn and dismissed the people, heading to the door where the cold air chilled him every time it opened.



Matilda held Grandfather's arm to stay him from rising to leave. "Let's wait."

He nodded.

Gabriel didn't look well, and he'd lacked his usual passion as he spoke. Had something happened to him this past week? Had he contracted her illness? She worried for him.

Finally, they stood, and holding fast to grandfather's arm, they slowly made their way to the door as it closed behind the last of the congregation. Gabriel watched their progress.

"It was a fine sermon, son," Lord Hennison said.

"Are you well, Gabriel? You appear fatigued." Tilly longed to reach out and touch him, but her prayer book was in one hand and the other held to Grandfather for support.

"I am well as can be expected, Miss Wilcox. I'm glad to see you've recovered, but are you sure it was wise to attend this morning?"

She quirked and eyebrow. "Are you telling me I do not appear in good health?" Where was the ready grin on her friend's face?

"I would never so insult a lady." His hand covered his heart.

"I'm bamming you, Gabriel. I am tired. You are aware I was sick. The doctor calls my recovery a miracle."

"Was he that much in doubt?" His frown led her to believe he cared more than he was letting on.

Lord Hennison cleared his throat. "I think it was the speed of the recovery that amazed him."

Gabriel seemed to relax at those words. "Ah, well that is good to hear. Hopefully, you'll be able to visit little Bennett again."

"How is he? Have you been to see him?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I've been otherwise occupied but hope to see him before Christmas Eve is upon us."

"Perhaps we could do that together?" Tilly offered.

"I'd like that."

"Matilda, we need to get you to the carriage and home so you can rest. I told her she might be overdoing it to come today, but she would not be gainsaid. Stubborn minx." Lord Hennison grinned down at her.

"Fine. We shall leave. You did well today, Gabriel. Thank you for your thought-provoking message."

"The glory is God's, but thank you."

She gave him a small smile, but his head lowered and she wondered at his reticence. As the carriage pulled away she spied him walk back to his home, head down, hands in his greatcoat pockets.

“Is Gabriel well? He seemed despondent.”

“He’s had an exhausting week, ’tis all.”

“How? Did something bad happen while I was ill?”

Lord Hennison reached over to pat her knee. “Your illness weighed heavily on all of us.”

She frowned. “Even mother?”

Now it was Lord Hennison’s turn to avoid her gaze as he forbore answering her. Tilly sighed and relaxed against the squabs. Soon she would be home, eat, and return to her bed to rest.

Curiosity swirled within her. What happened while she’d lain ill?

Gabriel stretched out on the sofa in his study. The fire blazed, keeping the room warm. He just finished a simple repast of bread and cheese. He'd given his staff leave to be with family for the week. The house was empty as a tomb and his heart ached that Matilda didn't remember him spending the past week by her side, caring for her whenever the maids weren't required. He had neglected his own needs so completely that it had taken some time to shave when he'd returned home, all scraggly and run down.

While running a fever, she'd told him she loved him and always had. Now she had no memory of his ministrations, and he had to wonder if her profession of affection was merely delusional talk caused by her illness.

Or perhaps he imagined it?

Sighing he closed his eyes and soon drifted to sleep, dreaming of his blonde angel holding a child and looking up at him with a smile.



Grandfather and Mother yelled at each other on Sunday afternoon, but Tilly never heard the words. The next day, her mother arrived downstairs for breakfast. Tilly had been so shocked she could hardly eat.

Her mother asked her to help with planning meals for the week. When that was accomplished, Mother went to rest, as did Tilly who experienced fatigue, not having fully recovered her strength. Tilly dreamed of Gabriel and what life would be like as his wife.

Hopeless dreams. They meant nothing.

If only she could convince herself of that.



Gabriel slid out of bed to his knees, exhaustion still clinging to him. He wasn't getting sick too, was he? He hoped not. There'd be no one to care for him. Not even servants. Bowing his head, he poured out his heart to God, asking for the strength to make it through the day.

Dragging himself to his feet he shaved and dressed. His clothes hung on him, having dropped weight the past week. Walking downstairs he shuffled to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and enjoy some jam on a slice of bread.

He settled into his study with his repast and kindled the fire. He sank into a chair to eat. The words of Psalm 42:5 slipped from his lips. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance."

It was as if he had soaked up all Matilda's grief and shame, carrying it on his shoulders. She'd seemed lighter, albeit weak, yesterday. He was the one oppressed. He hadn't stayed by her side to be noticed, but only because he loved her and longed to serve her—to be near and assure himself she would be well.

God granted that request, but the desire of his heart remained elusive. Psalm 38:9 spring to his lips. "Lord, all my desire is before Thee; and my groaning is not hid from Thee." But of course, his one desire should not be in a future with Mattie. It was to be in God and God alone. "Have I sinned against, Thee? That I have desired her more than Thou? Forgive me, Lord."

He finished his light meal. After opening the drapes to let in the winter sun, he settled at his desk with his Bible to prepare for Christmas Eve and Day services. Thoughts of how alone he would be when he was finished taunted him from the corner of his mind. Shoving them aside he immersed himself—as much a way to escape as to accomplish the task at hand.

After a short luncheon, Gabriel wrapped small gifts to present to his servants on St. Stephen's Day, or whenever they returned from their family visits. His housekeeper would at least return by that date, but not his cook. His horse at least lived in a nearby stable and was cared for there for a small fee.

Once the wrapping was complete, he grabbed his gloves, greatcoat and hat and set out for the Clark residence. He'd not seen little Bennett for over a week now.

"Mr. Morgan. We've missed seeing you. I pray you are well?" Mrs. Clark asked. "Mr. Clark is out working, but come in. Shall I make some tea?" She took his coat and hat and hung them by the door.

"I am well enough, thank you. Don't trouble yourself with tea. I stopped in to visit Bennett. I missed seeing the babe."

She led him to the front room where the infants rested in their bassinets. Gabriel scooped the little man into his arms and settled into a chair. "Well met, Bennett." He could have sworn the baby grinned at him. Mrs. Clark hovered nearby.

"Well, I'll be. He smiled at you, Mr. Morgan. That's the first time I've seen that. My little girl only just started smiling for her father."

"Perhaps he needs to be burped?" Gabriel asked.

"If it were gas he'd be crying." She settled into a chair across from him. "He missed seeing you and Miss Wilcox."

"Miss Wilcox was ill, and I remained away lest I too had become sick after visiting her. I did not want these precious children to come down with her illness." He glanced up to Mrs. Clark to find her with a tear in her eye. "Are you well?" he asked.

She shrugged and wiped away the tear. "You and Miss Wilcox

would be wonderful parents to little Bennett.”

He frowned. “I’m in no position at present to care for a child.”

“Not as an individual, but as a couple,” she riposted.

“An unlikely scenario.”

“Your desire for her has not escaped anyone’s notice.”

He ignored her and looked down at the sleeping child in his arms.

“Will you be attending the service on the eve of Christmas?”

She nodded. “’Tis time to venture forth.”

“Good.” The babe had fallen asleep in his arms so he placed the child back in his bassinet. “I have more work to do in preparation for this week.”

She nodded and rose to see him out the door. After donning his hat and coat and finding gloves, putting them on he gave the young mother a smile and stepped into the brisk wind to head for his empty house.



Monday morning, Matilda’s mother worked with her on holiday decorations for the house. They found some in the attic from years past and servants were sent to look for fresh holly and ivy. Ribbons were cut and tied. In the afternoon, they wrapped gifts for St. Stephen’s Day.

Tilly agonized over a Christmas gift for Gabriel, but soon came upon the right one.

Two days until the eve of Christmas. She’d get to listen to Gabriel preach again. Had he recovered?



Tuesday morning was a repeat of the day before. Gabriel awoke with a heaviness on his heart that was foreign to him. Was this how hope deferred felt? Proverbs 13:12 sprung to mind: *Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.*

Hope and desire.

He rushed to dress and headed to his study and began to write.

A knock at the door brought him out of his intense work. He rose and answered it to find Lord Hennison there. “My lord, come in out of the cold. What brings you to my home?”

“May we converse?”

“Certainly.” Gabriel took the older man’s coat and hat and hung them by the door.

“No servants?”

“They too deserve a holiday to celebrate with their families. They have leave to do so this week.”

“You are all alone here? Who cooks your meals?”

Gabriel’s stomach growled. He glanced down as heat rose in his

cheeks. "I do, but in my haste this morning I overlooked breakfast. If you do not mind my humble kitchen, we can go there, and I can prepare us some tea."

"And get yourself fed, son. I'll follow you."

The minister led his patron down the hallway to the back of the house where the kitchen was. Gabriel started a fire and set about to heating water. Had Cook left him any of those small cakes? He found some in the pantry and brought them out on a platter to present to his guest who sat on a bench at a worn, wooden table.

"When I was a young boy, I often came here to visit the preacher, and I sat at this very table."

"He also lacked servants?"

"He had a generous heart, much like you do, Gabriel."

Soon Gabriel poured tea and sat across from Lord Hennison. "He must have made a good impression on you."

"He did. How do you really fare, Mr. Morgan?"

Gabriel sipped his tea slowly, closing his eyes to savor the warmth. "I'm as well as you can see."

The older man nodded, "I wanted to thank you again for your care of my granddaughter this week past. The doctor said she may not have survived without your constant attention."

"I could do no less."

"You love her and you put hands and feet to that."

"It matters not. She cannot bring herself to love me."

"I could force the matter. You in her room—"

"Always with a chaperone, a maid, present."

"I'm trying to help you, Gabriel."

"I do not relish an unwilling bride, my lord."

"I wish—"

"Wishes are for children. We are men. God doesn't always give us what we ask for."

"Have you given up?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I won't pursue her, my lord. She does not desire my companionship much less my courtship."

"How'd you arrive at that conclusion?"

"We had a conversation...and she ran from me."

"Her heart yet grieves."

"As it should. There is no room there for love beyond those closest to her."

"She is different since her illness."

"How so?"

"I can't explain it. Only... Thank you for tea, Mr. Morgan. Will you join us for a repast on Christmas Day?"

Gabriel paused, uncertain. Why attend if he wasn't courting? Could

he go and simply be the local clergyman and nothing more when Tilly was present? "I do not want to intrude on a family gathering."

"Not much of a gathering when it is only Tilly and me. I can at least promise you a blazing Yule log and a decent meal."

"I'd be a fool to decline such an invitation."

"Good. We will see you then." The older man rose and Gabriel stood, walking him to the front door and handing him his coat and gloves.

"Thank you for visiting, my lord."

"The honor was all mine, Mr. Morgan. You rekindled fond memories, and I'm gratified to see you are well." Donning his hat, the older man departed the cottage and, with the help of a servant, entered his carriage.

Gabriel closed the door with a sigh before heading back into his study to continue his labors.



By Tuesday, Matilda had regained more strength, and after pleading with her grandfather, she found herself in a carriage bound for the Clark home. Entering, she hung up her coat.

"Ah, Miss Wilcox," Mrs. Clark said as she picked up her daughter. "What a pleasure to see you up and about. I heard you were quite ill, and little Bennett missed his visits with you and Mr. Morgan."

Tilly squinted, even as she bent to pick up the infant boy. "Mr. Morgan did not come by last week?"

"But of course not. He had been with you and did not want to pass along any illness to the children."

"Been with me?"

"The entire village is aware he spent the past week at the Hennison estate. How he managed to preach on Sunday, I do not know, but Mr. Clark told me the man looked as though he'd burnt the candle at both ends."

"I was quite ill and do not remember seeing him at the house. I was abed."

"Tis no matter. A man in love will do many things for his beloved."

"Do babies smile this early?" Changing the subject, Matilda peered down at the infant, who gave her a gummy grin.

"Not usually but little Bennett gave a similar smile to Mr. Morgan only yesterday."

"Good day, Bennett. Did you miss me?"

The baby looked as though her were about to talk. She could only imagine how sweet it would be to have a child in her arms like this every day.

"Have you fully recovered, miss? You still appear pale."

"I'm weak, but well. Grandfather insisted I take the carriage until I regain my strength."

"A young woman should not be walking around on her own. Pardon me for sayin' it."

"You are correct. Yet, is it fair that a maid be forced to walk with me? Even should she be paid, what can she do to protect me from harm?"

"I never considered that," Mrs. Clark said.

Bennett drifted to sleep. Matilda wished she could sit and hold him longer, but her energy quickly evaporated. She settled the infant back in his little bed. "I don't know when I'll be able to return, with the holidays upon us."

"You will be celebrating then?"

"I hope to. It was not part of my original plan, but it's as though I have a new life ahead of me and I want to enjoy these moments with my grandfather while I have them."

A soft smile crept over Mrs. Clark's face. "And a certain young gentleman?"

"There are several in this area. Did you have someone in mind?"

Mrs. Clark placed her daughter in her bed and went to help Tilly with her cloak. "You know of whom I speak, miss."

"May you have a peaceful Christmas, Mrs. Clark. I believe my footman has left a package at your back door. You may want what is in it."

Tilly left and a footman assisted her into the carriage.

As Tilly settled against the squabs thoughts tumbled in her mind about Gabriel. He was at her grandfather's home all of last week whilst she was ill? What did he do during that time? Had he visited her and spoke tender words to her as she had dreamed? What if it had really happened?

No. Grandfather would never allow an eligible bachelor, even a pastor, into her room as she struggled, insensible, with her illness. Would he?

Her eyes grew wide. That's exactly what her grandfather would do. All those dreams she thought she'd had? Heat rose in her cheeks at what she might have said to Gabriel.

Arriving home, she found the doctor there to check in on her. She submitted to his scrutiny of her breathing.

"I'll be honest, Miss Wilcox. I was skeptical about your recovery but Mr. Morgan would not listen, and for once I am grateful that someone did not follow my advice. If he ever decides to give up preaching, the man might make a great physician. His care for you ran counter to much of what I suggested and yet, here you are, hale and whole. Your strength will return in time. While I wish I could take

credit for the outcome, I will humbly acknowledge that obviously someone knew better than I in this instance.”

The doctor left and Tilly paced in her room. Gabriel not only was here, but also had nursed her back to health? Why would he risk his own health to do that?

Something had happened even as she slept with fevered nightmares. She realized the truth from which she'd been hiding. She loved Gabriel and always had. Why would she spurn him because of her father's poor choices? Gabriel did not hold them against her nor did anyone else. She'd been trapped in a prison of shame, but if Gabriel's prayers and tender care were the key, that prison door had been opened, and she was free. Free to live. Free to love.

But after how she had treated him and held him away from her desperate heart, would he pursue her again? Or had she lost her one opportunity for love?

Gabriel had spent his day in fasting and prayer as he waited for the service at the church. He would not see whether Matilda had decorated. He sought to put her out of his mind and focus on hearing what God would have him share. Heaviness weighed him down over the importance of this event in history. He shaved a second time before walking to the church for the evening service.

At the front door, he spied Mr. and Mrs. Clark present with both babies. Relief washed over him.

Mattie sat in the front with her grandfather and with another woman whom he assumed was her mother. Had the older woman risen from her bed to embrace new life? Her pale appearance and thin face as she dressed in grey added to his suspicion. The weight of his message grew heavier.

He began the service, and as time came to give his message he approached to the Clarks. "May I borrow Bennett for a little while?"

Mr. Clark nodded and handed the infant over.

Gabriel strode slowly to the front of the church holding the baby in the crook of his arm. Little Bennett grinned up at him.

"Friends and neighbors. Imagine what it was like. For hundreds of years God had not spoken to the Israelites. No prophets had recorded words, and they were under the thumb of Rome. Not quite as oppressed as they were while in Egypt, but still looking for deliverance. Every young Jewish mother prayed that she would be the one chosen to give birth to the Messiah.

"Yet God chose a woman who had yet to be wed. Why? Because He wanted there to be no dispute as to the paternity of this child. And He also proved that He had come for everyone, even when, by human appearances, they didn't obey the law.

"I can only imagine Joseph's heartbreak at finding Mary was with child. This was the woman he had pledged to marry. He'd been preparing a home for them. An unexpected twist in his life. But he was a noble man and would set aside his heart's desire and let her go.

"Until an angel appeared and gave him different instructions. God depended upon Joseph's good character, depth of faith, and love of Mary. Any other Jewish man would have followed the letter of the law and had her stoned to death. Instead, Joseph took her as his wife.

"Christmas is a season of hope and desire. Yet hopes continually were dashed. For four-hundred years the Messiah hadn't come. Mary, while obedient in trusting God, faced the whispers of her neighbors and the doubts of the man she loved. Joseph probably endured insults, and then, the long journey. Finally, it was time.

"A baby was born. Joseph, scared and alone with his new wife,

was there. It was messy. It wasn't comfortable. And they held a secret that few knew. This little child they now held in their hands and wrapped so humbly...would save the Israelites.

"I mentioned it was a season of desire as well. Joseph desired to take Mary as his wife and provide a normal life for her, but had to flee to another city. Mary had to leave her family and future in Nazareth. The place Joseph had been preparing for her. Then their new life together in Bethlehem was forfeit as they were forced into Egypt around two years following Jesus' birth.

"Shepherds desiring rest were terrified by angels singing of God's glory and peace. Who didn't desire peace?

"And God in human form. A tiny child at the center of it all. The very Scriptures that proclaim and foretell his birth also foretold his death. The people surrounding the infant Immanuel, desired a political, and national, Savior. Instead they got One who came to set hearts free from the bondage of sin and death.

"A baby, similar to this little one I hold in my arms now.

"The innocence of new life would take on the filth of our sin and wash it clean with his blood. Blood was spilt at his birth and again at his death. Yet just as he was born into this world through water and blood—he was killed in water and blood, only to rise again.

"A baby. The hope and desire of the world came not only to save the Israelite nation, but extended that gift of grace to us all.

"That is what we honor on this most holy day."

Bennett belched and the crowd stifled their giggles. Gabriel smiled down at the child who grinned back at him.

"As you leave and prepare to come tomorrow...think about your own hopes and desires and how God might be using Himself, even the time of waiting for Him to act, to draw You to Him and the peace He alone can offer."

Gabriel led the congregation in a song and dismissed them into the darkening night. He walked to the back of the church. Kissing Bennett's forehead, he handed the infant to Mr. Clark.

When Lord Hennison arrived at the end of the line of people, he motioned to the woman beside him. "Mr. Morgan, I'm not sure if you remember my daughter, Mrs. Wilcox."

Mr. Morgan gave her a bow of his head. "Mrs. Wilcox. I am delighted to see you here. You have been in my prayers."

A wan smile appeared, and her cheeks shimmered with a pale pink. "You are Gabriel, the little scamp who led my daughter into so many scrapes—and then rescued her from them all. My how you have grown up. Thank you for tonight's message."

"My pleasure, Mrs. Wilcox."

Mattie approached. The last person to leave the church. She'd

abandoned her silly cap. Lord Hennison escorted his daughter down the stairs to the coach.

“Miss Wilcox. You seem to have recovered well from your illness. I’m pleased to see that.”

“I have the Lord and you to thank for the fact that I recovered at all.”

“Me? I did nothing.”

“*Au contraire*, my friend. Isn’t it a sin to lie, especially in church?” The corner of her lip twitched as his gaze locked with hers.

“I’m glad if any of my meager efforts contributed to your recovery.”

She sighed and a gloved hand reached up to touch the side of his face. “Sweet Gabriel, always my angel. Only God knows what it cost you to be by my side. I have little recollection of what happened during that time, but if I spoke aloud the words of my heart, and you heard them, you know the hope and desire I hold. Your constant faithfulness and prayers broke through the lies I’ve embraced for far too long. That alone is a gift I can never repay.”

Gabriel swallowed hard. The desire that arose in him at her touch reminded him of hopes she dashed not long ago. Was she really saying her mumblings of fever-induced delusions were the real state of her heart?

“You owe me nothing, Mattie. I am grateful that God spared you. I could not imagine living in a world where you were not present.”

“We shall see you tomorrow after church?” Her hand dropped.

“Aye. Your grandfather invited me for the afternoon meal.”

Mattie glanced toward the door. “I look forwards to your message in the morning.” She reached up and kissed his cheek sending tremors to his toes. “Sleep well, Gabriel.”



Matilda grinned to herself. She’d surprised Gabriel with her words. And yet he was so humble as to not promote himself again as a suitor. While that frustrated her, his widened eyes and the shiver she caught as she kissed his cheek, led her to believe he still had feelings for her.

Tomorrow, perhaps, it would become clearer. Just how did a woman tell a man she’d changed her mind? Gabriel was too noble to pursue her against her will. What could she do? She’d no experience with womanly wiles.

She was aided into the coach by a footman and sat across from her grandfather and next to her mother. Regaining her mother had been an unexpected blessing the past few days, as well.

“Mr. Morgan has grown into a handsome young man,” her mother proclaimed. “And quite a different style in the pulpit. I’m not sure I approve of his methods, but he definitely held my attention. Was that

the baby you found abandoned?"

"Yes, mother. His name is Bennett."

"Blessed. He definitely is if he has your grandfather as a benefactor."

"It was the least I could do for the poor child," Grandfather said.

"I wasn't deriding your decision. You've always been generous to those in need. We've imposed on your generosity for too long."

"You are always welcome in my home, dear." Kind eyes and a soft smile echoed his sentiment as he gazed at his daughter.

Matilda grinned. After their fight, it seemed that her mother's attitude had changed. Not only was she embracing life again, but she was taking an interest in the activities around her.

"I plan to put off my mourning wardrobe as of tomorrow," Mattie said.

"Really?" Her mother's surprised words were soft.

"I'm not saying you need to, Mother, but I do. My wardrobe might be a year or more out of style, but I tried some of my dresses on and they still fit."

"You want to dazzle Mr. Morgan?"

Matilda chuckled. "The color of my dress won't help with that, Mother."

"You never did look good in grey or lavender," her mother stated.

They pulled up to the house and a footman helped them descend. Tilly assisted her mother with the stairs.

"My dear, I'm not an invalid. I am getting stronger by the day, but thank you."

"I'm glad you are embracing life again."

"Well, when my father started to explain all that was going on, I was convinced you needed your mother's guidance and help."

"Help?"

"To solicit a proposal from the minister."

Tilly's face grew warm.

"You are not indifferent to him."

They started up the stairs to their rooms.

"No, mother. I've come to realize I love him...and I always have. I was just—afraid."

"Of what?"

"Loving someone so much I couldn't survive without him should something happen."

"I've been a horrible example to you."

"Mother, you loved Father. We were both devastated by the fact and manner of his death."

"But my collapse into grief put too great a burden on your shoulders."

“Those burdens kept me busy.”

“Now they will be shared.” At the upper landing, her mother turned to her. “And I will help you with Gabriel. I don’t think it will take much to bring him up to scratch.”

“Mother!” Matilda gasped. “I don’t need you pushing us together. This is something he and I need to figure out ourselves.”

“Fine. But I have some tricks up my sleeve. After tonight’s message, I too have hope for the future.”

“Heaven help me,” Matilda whispered as she strode to her room to prepare for bed.

“He will,” Her mother called after her with a chuckle.



Matilda stretched as the sun peeked in through the drapes. Christmas Day was here. She hopped out of bed and hurried through her ablutions. Soon her maid was there, and her hair put up in an attractive style. And then the dress. A warm woolen gown with a soft print on a background of blue.

“This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” She surveyed herself in the mirror. Color was back in her cheeks, and she was eager to see Gabriel. Not only to celebrate their Savior’s birth, but for a meal and whatever else might come along with being in his company.

She descended the stairs and went to break her fast, finding her mother and grandfather already present. She selected some food and sat as a footman brought her hot cocoa.

“You look beautiful, my dear,” Grandfather said.

Her mother gave a regal nod. At least Mother had dressed in lavender instead of the blacks and greys. It was a step forward. “You are quite becoming in that shade of blue.”

“Thank you, both.”

“We need to leave soon lest we be late,” Grandfather warned.

Tilly nodded and applied herself to her meal. Once finished they all rose and fetched their outer garments. Tilly donned a pretty bonnet to wear with flowers matching the color of her dress.



Arriving at church they had just settled into their pew when Gabriel strode in to begin the service. Tilly watched him, enraptured. Hope. Desire. She had tumbled those words around in her head last night. She was free from the past, and she prayed that God would open the door wide for a future with the man who stood before her, so eloquently speaking from God’s Word. To serve side-by-side with him in this community gave her a thrill of pleasure.

When the service concluded, they made their way to the back of

the church. Gabriel's smile traveled to his eyes as he took in her appearance. "You look lovely today, Miss Wilcox."

"You'll arrive soon?"

"I'll be there within an hour."

Tilly nodded and swallowed her excitement. "Good."

She walked to the carriage with a skip in her step.

"Nice way to bait the hook," her mother whispered.

"What?" Tilly asked.

"She refers to fishing, my dear. You just wiggled a worm in front of the fish, and he appreciated the sight."

"Are you two playing matchmaker?" Matilda was suddenly suspicious.

Grandfather shrugged. "Didn't think either of you needed the help, to be honest."

"Of course they do," her mother asserted.

Matilda sighed as she leaned back against the squabs. Gabriel was coming. Matchmakers or not, her hope rested in the One who invented love to begin with.



After changing into another dress, Tilly paced in the drawing room by the Yule log, which burned strong in the fireplace. Mom had helped with some of the decorations, and the house seemed to be coming out of a deep sleep to embrace color and joy again. It was Christmas. Her gift for Gabriel was sitting on the mantel and she hoped he liked it.

A knock on the outer door alerted her to his arrival. Energy thrummed through her as she awaited his entrance.

"Mr. Morgan," the butler intoned.

"Fetch my uncle or mother, Simon."

With a stately nod the butler withdrew, leaving the door open.

Gabriel stood there with a freshly tied cravat and a royal blue coat over his blue, gold-embroidered waistcoat.

"You may come in. I won't bite."

The corner of his mouth twitched "I'm not sure that's entirely true. I remember teeth marks on my arm once."

She nodded. "I should state perhaps that I have no intentions of biting you today."

"Is that a promise?" He took a step forward and stopped.

"I hold no intention to, and it has been many years since I have done so, but I suppose if I were sorely provoked, it could happen. As it is Christmas, I anticipate that being highly unlikely."

Gabriel pulled out a package from behind his back and placed it on the table.

She raised her eyebrows.

“Surely you’re bursting with curiosity.”

“But of course. It is beautifully wrapped.”

His head tilted to one side. “You look well. I’m glad you gave up wearing mourning and that silly cap.”

“Mother has moved to half-mourning, but it is a movement forward, so I won’t complain.”

“Some losses you never recover from.”

A shuddering sigh overtook her, and he was before her in an instant, placing a hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry, Tilly. I didn’t mean to evoke painful memories on today of all days.”

“Not all the memories are painful. There were many years of good ones, and I’m learning to focus on those.”

“A wise choice.”

A voice cleared in the doorway. “You young people aren’t up to mischief are you?” Mrs. Wilcox asked.

Gabriel had taken a step back and turned to face Tilly’s mother. “Why would you suspect me of mischief?”

Mrs. Wilcox chuckled. “Because the two of you, when left too long to your own devices, always scraped up trouble. I doubt age has changed that.”

“Mother, I hope we are past that now. We were discussing how only good memories are best shared on a day like today.”

“I remember holes in your stockings, shoes that needed to be replaced and gowns you would wear only when you were with Gabriel.”

Tilly’s face grew warm. “I was an adventuresome girl.”

“You still are, only now you wear proper dresses and use your energies to help others.”

Lord Hennison entered. “Oh, good. We are all assembled, and I’ve been told the meal is ready. Come along.” He held out an arm.

Mother rested her hand on her father’s wrist and the exited the room.

Gabriel offered his own arm, and Matilda touched her hand to it. As he led her from the room, she tried desperately to ignore the wiggles in her stomach and the tingles in her toes at being close to him again.

How soon could they get through this meal so she could talk with him more?

Not soon enough.

Their meal was a quiet affair. Gabriel was seated across from Matilda and delighted in watching her as she interacted with her grandfather and mother. They spoke highly of his message the previous evening as well as this morning. Their compliments humbled him. *Lord, did they see Thee or my delivery?* To be called gifted as a minister was a blessing and a curse. If lives were not drawn closer to God, then the “gift” had been useless. Melancholy began to wrap itself around him once again.

He missed the boisterous celebration with his family.

He endured the hopelessness of his love for the woman across from him even as she sparkled with life and awarded him her smiles.

At the end of the meal the women departed. Lord Hennison waved a footman to approach, but addressed Gabriel. “A glass of port before we join the ladies?”

Gabriel shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but out of deference to what your daughter and granddaughter have endured, I will forgo the pleasure.”

“Surely there is nothing wrong in a few sips?”

“It is not the drink or the action that is my motive, but the opportunity to relieve anxiety in the hearts of the women of your household.”

“You would hold their well-being above your own.”

Gabriel nodded.

“Very well then, let us rise and join the ladies.”

As they entered the room, Mrs. Wilcox rose. “Father, Mr. Morgan. I must plead weariness, although these past days have been grand. I need to rest. I have not yet recovered my full strength.”

“It was a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Wilcox. Happy Christmas.”

A grin spread across her features. “It was in a large part due to you, Gabriel. Thank you for being there when I couldn’t. You’ve given me the gift of my daughter, and I am grateful.”

Gabriel nodded, his attention arrested by Matilda sitting on the loveseat. Mrs. Wilcox quit the room.

Lord Hennison yawned. “I am fatigued as well, but will not leave you unchaperoned. I’ll be over by the window, enjoying a good book.”

Gabriel grew confused. They were leaving him practically alone with Matilda? A woman who had run from his offer of a lifetime of love and adoration.

“Come and sit by me, Gabriel. I have a gift for you.”

“Gifts are not usually exchanged between a man and woman who are not related.”

“Ah, but you brought one as well, so you did not abide by that either.”

“Perhaps it is for your grandfather.” He moved to her side and sat, having retrieved the gift from the table.

“I doubt it.” She thrust her package forward. “Please open it.”

Gabriel set his gift on a table and began to unwrap the package. Inside rested a stone in the shape of a heart. He glanced up at her. She had the most angelic smile.

“Do you remember this, Gabriel? We found it on one of our rambles before you left for university. You handed it to me and said that your heart was forever mine.”

“Yet you give it back to me?”

“It’s my way of saying that my heart is forever yours.”

His heart skipped a beat. He looked down at the rock and picked it up to hold it in his hands. “This gift represents your love returned to me?”

“And that I entrust it to your care. While that stone might be hard to break, my heart is not so impervious to harm; yet I willingly place it in your hands.”

She loves me. His thumb ran across the smooth stone.

She loves me. Emotion welled within threatening to burst out as tears.

She loves me. “I will hold this gift as the rare and precious thing it represents. Thank you for entrusting it to me.” He gently placed the stone back in its wrapping. He reached for the package he’d brought.

He placed the gift in her hands. “Happy Christmas, Mattie.”

Her eyes sparkled as she eagerly unwrapped the packaging. Unfolding the cloth within she pulled out a dainty pearl in a setting of gold attached to a chain. “Oh, Gabriel. This is beautiful.”

“I worked as a tutor to save money to buy that for you. And then I couldn’t find you. You are a pearl of great price, Matilda.”

“Can you secure it for me? She turned her back to him holding up the ends on either side of her neck.

“But of course.” A tingle shook him as he accidentally grazed her neck with his fingers. With restraint, he closed the clasp.

She turned to face him, her cheeks a rosy pink. “It’s beautiful, Gabriel. Thank you.”

Ask her.

Gabriel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Really? Now Lord?*

Silence greeted his plea. God apparently did not need to tell him more than once.

He reached for and took Tilly’s hands in his own. “You know that I have loved you for longer than I ever realized. It broke my heart when I failed to find you. When you were ill, terror gripped me. I didn’t

want to lose you again. Do you think you could find it in your heart to love a lowly minister? I don't possess a title or a grand home, but I offer you my love which has remained constant through the years and has only grown deeper."

"Are you asking me to marry you, Gabriel?"

He nodded, afraid to say more lest he ruin the moment with inane words.

"I would be honored to be your wife."

His breathing hitched. "Really? You'll marry me?"

"Under one condition."

"What is that?"

"We adopt Bennett and raise him as our own so he won't be alone in this world."

A smile spread wide across his face. "Absolutely. I adore that babe, and hopefully he'll not have to wait long for siblings."

She nodded and rose to her feet. She pulled him up and took him to the doorway. Lord Hennison remained turned away, seemingly engrossed in his novel.

"What...?"

"I've waited a long time for this." She pointed up to the kissing bough.

"I as well." He bent his head and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her to hold her close. When he pulled back, he gazed down at her. His childhood friend and now fiancée.

A throat cleared. "I hope that means you'll be marrying her, Mr. Morgan."

"Aye, my lord. It does. She said yes."

"Well done." Lord Hennison rose from his chair and strode toward them. "You have my blessing, and I'm delighted that you'll be close."

"Gabriel has given me the best gift of all, Grandfather."

"And what was that?"

"The hope in and desire for the Savior Who led Gabriel back to me."

Gabriel turned to his benefactor. "Will you excuse us?"

Lord Hennison grinned and moved past them. "Three weeks, my son, will seem like forever."

"I do possess a special license, so we need only my friend to come marry us at his earliest convenience."

"Smart young man you snared for yourself, Tilly." Lord Hennison strode away and went into his study.

"All alone at last," Tilly whispered as she pulled him into the room closing the door behind them.

"Are you trying to compromise me, Miss Wilcox?"

"Yes," she whispered as she reached up to kiss him again.

A moment later, when he stepped back from that kiss, he shook his head. "I hope you don't make me wait long, Tilly..."

"As soon as you wish, Gabriel, my angel, my friend... I love you."

"And I, you." He caressed her cheek, bringing his other hand up behind her head.

"Then stop talking and kiss me again," Tilly pouted.

Gabriel was content to oblige. Some gifts were definitely worth waiting for.

Biography

Susan M. Baganz chases after three Hobbits, and is a native of Wisconsin. She is an Editor with Pelican Book Group, LLC, specializing in bringing great romance novels and novellas to publication. Susan writes adventurous historical and contemporary romances with a biblical world-view.

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Susan speaks, teaches, and encourages others to follow God in being all He has created them to be. With her seminary degree in counseling psychology, a background in the field of mental health, and years serving in church ministry, she understands the complexities and pain of life as well as its craziness. She serves behind-the-scenes in various capacities at her church and is a member of American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW), and serves on the board of the southeast chapter. Her favorite pastimes are lazy...snuggling with her dog while reading a good book or sitting with a friend chatting over a cup of spiced chai latte.

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